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SUBJECT: SERBIA: KOSOVO MINISTER BOGDANOVIC CALLS FOR DIALOGUE AND
FLEXIBILITY

REF: 3/26/09 Pristina Bullets

Summary

1. (SBU) Serbian Minister for Kosovo Goran Bogdanovic told Ambassador March 27 that dialogue is the only way to address and eventually resolve everyday problems faced by Kosovo Serbs, singling out his recent talks with EULEX Head Yves de Kermabon and Kosovo Electric Company representatives. Bogdanovic told the Ambassador that the GOS is committed to avoiding politicization of issues and finding practical solutions on issues such as electricity and the Kosovo Property Agency outside of the public eye, but that this required greater flexibility on the part of the authorities in Pristina. Regarding recent comments by State Secretary Zvonimir Stevic that Kosovar Albanians were preparing a "pogrom" against Kosovo Serbs, Bogdanovic said that the statements were "bad for Kosovo Serbs and even worse for me." End Summary.

Cooperation with EULEX

2. (SBU) Minister Bogdanovic told the Ambassador that he was pleased with his "long-awaited" March 19 meeting with European Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) Head of Mission Yves de Kermabon. He said that the visit, which also included successful meetings with the Finance, Interior, and Justice Ministers, represented a step forward toward discussions on technical issues such as police, customs, and the judiciary. Bogdanovic told us that he had encouraged de Kermabon to use his credibility with various communities in Kosovo, developed during his past duty with KFOR, to visit the north and open up a dialogue.

3. (SBU) Ambassador responded by urging Bogdanovic to build on this momentum by engaging actively with Peter Sorenson, the personal representative of EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana. Bogdanovic replied that his Ministry is in frequent contact with Sorenson and believes that opening of the EULEX office in Belgrade would further facilitate this process. He used this opportunity to stress, for the first of many times during the conversation, that he and the GOS are committed to calm, low-key dialogue that avoids unnecessary politicization of issues.

Plea for Greater Flexibility

4. (SBU) Emphasizing that his top priority was helping Kosovo Serbs and thereby preventing a "humanitarian catastrophe," Bogdanovic told the Ambassador that differences over Kosovo status should not hinder efforts to find solutions to problems like electricity and education that "would not harm the Kosovar Albanians." As an example of his commitment to helping Kosovo Serbs, Bogdanovic seized upon ongoing

efforts to address corruption in north Kosovo. Ambassador noted that we had pressed the Serbian government to arrest Kosovo-Serb troublemakers in Mitrovica. Bogdanovic confirmed Belgrade was trying to ease these troublemakers out of positions in which they had misused Serbian funds. Ambassador said their eliminator would be an important confidence-building measure for Serbs and Albanians alike.

15. (SBU) Bogdanovic insisted, however, that Serbia would not moderate its stance on Kosovo's status, emphasizing that the GOS would continue to demand that Pristina attend regional meetings such as CEFTA as "UNMIK-Kosovo." He nevertheless claimed that differences over Kosovo would not impact Serbia's efforts, led by President Tadic, to improve relations with its neighbors, even if recognitions by "family members" (that is, former Yugoslav countries) were hard to swallow.

16. (SBU) Bogdanovic criticized as unhelpful recent electricity outages in Kosovo Serb communities and the new GOK policy of denying entry to GOS officials who attempt to travel to Kosovo. He focused on Belgrade Mayor Dragan Djilas's March 23 attempt to visit Kosovska Kamenica, saying that GOK inflexibility had prevented the delivery of humanitarian aid and hurt common people. The Ambassador said there needs to be a well-defined policy in place that would allow reasonable differentiation between provocative and constructive GOS visits.

Possibilities for Progress- KEK and KPA?

17. (SBU) The Minister spoke very positively about his March 25 meeting with representatives of the Kosovo Electric Company (KEK) (ref). Reiterating that dialogue is the key to addressing this

BELGRADE 00000280 002 OF 002

technical issue, Bogdanovic emphasized that it is clear that Kosovo Serbs need to pay for electricity but that the modalities require further consideration.

18. (SBU) He told the Ambassador the GOS discussed electricity at its March 26 cabinet meeting and agreed to seek a solution while avoiding a "hubbub" in the press. In particular, the government intends to form a working group with representatives from the Ministries of Energy, Foreign Affairs, and Kosovo to explore the possibilities of donating energy to KEK. He also touted the GOS proposal to allow Electro Kosmet, the branch of the state-owned Serbia Electric Company (EPS) that operates in northern Kosovo, to receive a license to serve as a second electricity distributor.

19. (SBU) Regarding the Kosovo Property Agency (KPA), Bogdanovic's adviser Vladimir Jovicic confirmed that the Ministry has received and is studying a proposal from UNHCR to take over the entire KPA process in Serbia, including employing KPA staff as UN employees. He termed the proposal, which would resolve an impasse that occurred when Serbia closed all KPA offices on its territory in mid-2008, "very constructive," adding that "it is in our interest to solve this problem."

Stevic Remains a Problem

110. (SBU) The Ambassador pressed Minister Bogdanovic on comments by GOS officials in connection with the March 24 tenth anniversary of the NATO air campaign, emphasizing that the GOS public message had failed to acknowledge the historical context that preceded this decision. The Ambassador also objected to public comments by Kosovo Ministry State Secretary Zvonimir Stevic that Kosovar Albanians were preparing a "pogrom" against Kosovo Serbs, telling Bogdanovic that the GOS should either provide proof this was the case or specifically disavow Stevic's statements.

111. (SBU) Bogdanovic rolled his eyes and grimaced at the mention of Stevic, a holdover Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) official in his ministry. He initially argued that the tabloids Kurir and Glas Javnosti had twisted Stevic's words, who, according to Bogdanovic, had only repeated parliamentary testimony by Security Information

Agency (BIA) head Sasa Vukadinovic. (Press reports of the public portion of Vukadinovic's testimony refer only to the possibility of violence in Kosovo due to a faltering economic situation.) Bogdanovic then distanced himself from Stevic's comments, telling the Ambassador that they were "bad for Kosovo Serbs and even worse for me." Elaborating on this last point, Bogdanovic explained that he had called Stevic shortly before the meeting to ask "how am I going to respond to the Ambassador?" Ambassador responded that such statements reflected badly on the Ministry and the Minister himself, undercutting his avowed commitment to low-key progress.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Minister Bogdanovic was clearly trying to focus on practical issues of greatest importance to Kosovo Serbs and on dialogue as the means to achieving progress. If he sticks to his pledge to follow a low-key approach that avoids politicization, coming on the heels of his positive talks with EULEX Head de Kermabon and KEK representatives, we can only welcome such a development. We must hold Bogdanovic firmly to his commitment to engage constructively on issues such as electricity and property. To do that, the EU's Peter Sorenson in Belgrade and EULEX in Pristina must move forward quickly and decisively with expert-level discussions, seizing the agenda on the full spectrum of open issues.
End Comment.

MUNTER